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AUTHOR Lawry, Jon S.
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ABSTRACT

Considering the plethora of annotation which accompanies John Milton's poetry, a plan of the structure of "Paradise Lost" is offered as an aid to comprehension for undergraduate students and as a teaching guide for college teachers. The poem is divided into three parts of four books each for pedagogical purposes, and major themes and characters are delineated. Special attention is directed to the central theme of human choice between good and evil. Selected quotations serve as literary signposts. (RL)

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Reading *Paradise Lost*

"The Grand Masterpiece to Observe"

JON S. LAWRY

TE 500 477

THE INSTRUCTOR PLEDGED to teach Milton to average American undergraduates may come to feel that even the most willing student "ne'er looks to [Milton's] Heav'n amidst his gorgeous feast,/ But with besotted base ingratitude/ Crams."[1] The student can be brought to a similar despair by the weight of annotation necessary for reading even the titles of the poems. Even a capable graduate student may become so heavily entangled in the many necessary special approaches to Milton—seventeenth-century science, angelology, demonology, rhetoric, Judaic and apocryphal lore, the classics, classical political doctrine, and so on—as well as in the wilderness of critical disagreements that he too abandons hope of reading Milton's superb works as poems rather than as problems. Both instructor and students are in constant danger of losing "what religious, what glorious and magnificent use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things" ("Of Education," p. 637).

If Milton is studied outside a course bearing his name, the problem is compounded. It is necessary that every student, English major or no, encounter Milton; but if he reads *Paradise Lost* in a survey course, he will read as he runs and is likely to remember only the specious grandeur of Satan or the peculiarities of angelic love. The epic will then

[1] *Comus*, lines 777-779. Quotations are from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

Mr. Lawry, associate professor at Ball State Teachers College (Indiana), is interested in restoring Milton to the average reader, and vice versa.

degenerate into chaos. Neither the instructor nor the student, to say nothing of the shade of John Milton, can be happy with such a reading.

For those reasons, it is helpful to employ a plan or argument of the structure of *Paradise Lost*. Although the plan that follows is defensible critically at most points, it will necessarily create some distortions, oversimplifications, and questionable interpretations. The attempt to distill or schematize a work always does, and, if the work is complex, the particular injuries are likely to be severe. Yet the opposite risks seem on balance to be the greater. Therefore, a class reading Milton may work profitably from the structural diagram sketched in here, but must be warned that a reader will have to push free of its bounds in his detailed reading.

For pedagogic purposes, then, *Paradise Lost* is taken to be formed in three parts of four books each (ignoring the original form of ten books, and the remote background of a five-act play). The entire work is assumed to concern human choice of good or evil—the "Proairesis" Milton mentions in his essay "Of Education" as the "act of reason" enabling man "with some judgment [to] contemplate upon moral good and evil" (p. 635). The first part presents at once the grand objects of choice: Satan, seen in Books I and II; God, revealed in Book III. The clash of those grand antagonisms, with man ready to appear on the scene, occupies Book IV. Although the reader is urged to consider God and Satan also on "historical" and theological grounds, and Satan as a developing "character," the principal emphasis is given to the typological choices that they in their essences represent—blinding, subjective, self-imprisoning egotism on the one hand, and a calm, magisterial objectivity on the other. (Although few readers can ignore the seemingly defensive and autocratic character of Milton's God, they can nevertheless accept the typical choice *for* God as that of creativity, reason, and foresight.) The reader must acknowledge God-given liberty as the condition that both permits and necessitates the choice. He should then take into account the additional "freedom" offered in God's pity. This attribute, which God's critics often overlook, will freely permit Christ to right the scales of human choice—even if (and by God's foreknowledge, when) man falls to the choice of evil. The great typological choices having been established, Satan is seen at the end of the first part "freely" penetrating Earth, bringing choice to man. We must of course remember that Satan's freedom rests within the great design of God, and that his evil will be countered in much the same way that man's choice is—by turning error to the service of truth, and evil to the cause of good.

The second part, Books V-VIII, begins with danger signals of man's bent toward the wrong choice. Adam addresses Eve in dangerously worshipful terms; Eve displays a "Satanic" vanity in her near-worship of her own reflection rather than the more austere and reasonable presence of Adam. Therefore, God sends down Raphael, an anticipatory type of Christ and a foil to the already-present Satan, to warn and attempt to "redeem" the human couple by correcting the bent of their great choice. Books VI through VIII are given over almost wholly to the divine aid of instruction. The otherwise silly Battle in Heaven is therefore not to be read as history or even, primarily, as imitation of Homer, but as illustration of choice: Satan on the one hand, choosing ambition, vanity, and degrading illusion, against Abdiel (and later, Christ) on the other, choosing fidelity, service, and the objectivity of God. The nature of the choice and its consequences could hardly be made more clear. If man makes the choice typified by Satan, he will plunge into the destructive emptiness of a virtual or a real

hell, much as the fallen angels hurtle from the edge of Heaven like so many Gadarene swine. Raphael insists upon the comparison, and its instructive warning:

> let it profit thee to have heard
> By terrible Example the reward
> Of disobedience; firm they might have stood,
> Yet fell; remember, and fear to transgress.
>
> (VI, 909-912)

If man chooses as Abdiel chose, he may ascend a scale of increasingly refined being not only to fellowship but to likeness with angels, and his generations "of Worshippers" will be signally blessed rather than cursed. Adam comprehends the choice, but an ominous Satanic undertow threatens his understanding. His great worship of Eve, which in all particulars may (if he so chooses) be degraded into a parallel of the creation and worship of Sin by Satan, is paired with his dangerous questioning of the ways of God, which resembles that of Satan previously and of Eve in the Fall to come. But the great offer and the great hope for Adam and his generations stand, the high point of human possibility in *Paradise Lost* and a counter to the notion that the Fall is necessarily fortunate:

> Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,
> Improv'd by tract of time, and wing'd ascend
> Ethereal, as wee, or may at choice
> Here or in Heav'nly Paradises dwell.
>
> (V, 497-500)
>
> Thrice happy men,
> And sons of men, whom God hath thus advanc't,
> Created in his Image, there to dwell
> And worship him . . .
> And multiply a Race of Worshippers
> Holy and just: thrice happy if they know
> Thir happiness, and persevere upright.
>
> (VII, 625-632)

Man, then, must move from his static condition in Paradise, but does not have to move downward (if we attribute no necessity to God's foreknowledge). To "persevere upright" in a type of creative spiritual evolution is a choice open to man, the results of which—or the failure of which—have been demonstrated at great length and with great dramatic force. The doctrine of *Paradise Lost* insists that man was "sufficient to have stood"; four books have been devoted largely to increasing that sufficiency through divine instruction. But the words "persevere upright," with their promise of increasing humanity, hover at the brink of Fall.

The final part of *Paradise Lost* in this scheme—Books IX-XII—sees man plunge downward in a Fall almost exactly duplicating that typological Fall of Satan related in Book VI. However, God again intervenes for man, much as he had in the second part, by offering again instruction toward right choice. God continues the same; only man has changed, and even he may right himself, by a human choice.

First, Eve relaxes into the pride, imagination, and isolation that we now recognize as Satanic. Adam warns her as Raphael had warned him, but offers her a like freedom of choice; his motives for doing so, however, reveal passional weakness rather than God-like strength. The Serpent—which in one sense is Eve's own unreined imagination contrasting with her "upright" reason—"seduces" her to that which she has already desired: ambition, egotism that leaves no place for God or Adam, and sexual vanity. It is too pat to say that she chooses only passion over reason, but it is quite true that her love for Adam and for God (the latter celebrated in the great Hymn of Book V) is weaker than her wandering desire. The prohibited Tree of Knowledge to which she is drawn—a symbol often embarrassing to a humanist, but not greatly so when read firmly in context—presents only knowledge of *evil*. Man has had free access to practically all other

knowledge in the second part of *Paradise Lost*, and has been told of the evil which is Satan, but in the third part he plunges to the dark underside or reverse of his previous active knowledge. Adam voluntarily follows Eve into disobedience and the Satanic "knowledge" that is not long in coming. After an initial fall into voracious sexuality, they plunge still further downward into the mutual recriminations Raphael had used to War in Heaven to warn them of:

> haply of thy Race
> In future days, if Malice should abound,
> Some one intent on mischief, or inspir'd
> With dev'lish machination might devise
> Like instrument to plague the Sons of men
> For sin, on war and mutual slaughter bent.
>
> (VI, 501-506)

Satan's cannon in heaven has received its chosen counterpart: hatred in Paradise.

The Son's judgment on them, together with his promise that from their seed shall come not only men damned but also the instrument for men saved, leads Adam and Eve from suicidal despair to penitential tears—the first sure sign of a reformed choice for union and God. Although Sin and Death rise ghoulishly upon the fallen human race that chose them, their great Victim, later to be their Master, has already claimed victory for those who will elect victory. Tears, and a will toward better choice, lead man "upward" toward the historical Christ at almost exactly the moment that Satan falls into the serpent he chose to be, vainly tasting the fruits of temptation over and over again. The typical reversal of man's errant choice by God's design is underway.

Michael descends as a type of the Christ of the Last Judgment, balancing the descent of the gentle, "redemptive" Raphael of the instructional second part, to expel Adam and Eve into our world. Much as Raphael had looked back to the great typological choices, Michael looks ahead to a pattern of like choices. Book XI is somewhat grimly devoted to the results of Satanic choice: Cain, death, vanity, alluring sexuality (to which Adam still is tempted), and the great flood. However, a few men choosing God (as Abdiel had chosen in Heaven) point the opposite choice and its promise: Abel ("a Shepherd"), Enoch, Noah. In Book XII, hope rises as Michael "looks homeward" to an increase of right-choosing men, culminating in Christ as the "second Adam": Noah again, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua-Jesus. Evil of course continues in the world, but the accelerating incidence of Christ-types leads to Adam's greatest son and greatest hope:

> But to the Cross he nails thy Enemies,
> The Law that is against thee, and the sins
> Of all mankind, with him there crucifi'd,
> Never to hurt them more who rightly trust.
>
> (XII, 415-418)

What is more, Christ's disciples will go out like latter Raphaels to advise men upon their aided choice.

Adam becomes content with the knowledge supplied by Michael in the third part. As he scans the dark path to hard labor and painful death, he knows that he can nevertheless "possess/ A paradise within [him], happier far" (XII, 587). As the other Eden, lost through choice, flames into a vaguely hellish desert in one more token of their sorrowful choice, Adam and Eve, reconciled to God, to one another, and to their destiny both damned and blessed, go forth with relative serenity:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through *Eden* took thir solitary way.
>
> (XII, 646-649)

The final lines recapitulate the choice offered throughout the narrative, along with the counterweighting of God—"where to choose/ Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide." "Place of rest" clearly refers in part to a place of eternal peace or alienation, and the choice continues to be theirs.

The gift of freedom to choose, dangerous if misunderstood or misused, is delineated by God in Book V, but across the course of the epic his design and the sacrifice of Christ oppose the possible "swerve" to error:

> advise him of his happy state,
> Happiness in his power left free to will,
> Left to his own free Will, his Will though free,
> Yet mutable; whence warn him to beware
> He swerve not too secure.
>
> (V, 234-238)

Both man's position within that freedom as well as the objects and consequences of choice are indicated in a swift reductive diagram in Book X:

> and now in little space
> The confines met of Empyrean Heav'n
> And of this World, and on the left hand Hell
> With long reach interpos'd.
>
> (X, 320-323)

In one sense, man is placed at the center of two moral polarities and given the choice of aspiration to Heaven (as Raphael had promised), or degradation to Hell (as the angel's account had warned). We must not constitute Heaven and Hell as metaphors only, but it is clear that they are to some extent "inside" man, created from his propensities and choices. Nor should we take all the historical accounts as merely typological or atemporal indications of the two choices. On the other hand, we must let them serve that sense in part.

Our scheme for grasping *Paradise Lost* as a whole works fairly satisfactorily, and is recommended to classes that read only parts of the work. It has, of course, the shortcomings admitted at the outset. Some offsetting compensations may be noted in closing. The three-part structure offers a neat comparison with Dante, except that here the settings run Inferno-Paradiso-Purgatorio. The scheme insists that God and Satan be seen as perspectives of human choice, in part. God thereby comes off much better, and Satan much worse, than some past criticism might indicate. In addition, many details that seem ridiculous—angelic corporeality, gunpowder in heaven, and the like—may be seen as important for man's instruction toward his own choice. Finally, the plan permits or demands each reader's entry into the poem as a participant: *Paradise Lost* comes to be "about" him and his own choice of good or evil, hell or heaven, Satan or God. Myth and history—and, to a degree, theology as well—return to the human center where their meaning must reside, and the majestic poetry impresses that meaning with great force and beauty. The risks involved in using such a plan, then, are probably not so great as the probable reward.

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